

Interview With Stanislav Grof

by Edie Weinstein-Moser

With an inquisitive nature and brilliant mind, Dr. Stanislav Grof is one of the founders of Transpersonal Psychology, which focuses on the transcendent nature of human consciousness. A short definition from the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology suggests that transpersonal psychology is concerned with the study of humanity's highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness (Lajoie and Shapiro, 1992:91).

This certainly exemplifies the work that Stan has done since receiving his MD in 1956 from the Charles University School of Medicine in Prague and, in 1964, a Ph.D. from the Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences. He is a seemingly tireless explorer and advocate of 'normalizing' non-ordinary states of consciousness. He has developed with his wife Christina a modality called Holotropic Breathwork, which according to his website: "is a powerful approach to self-exploration and healing that integrates insights from modern consciousness research, anthropology, various depth psychologies, transpersonal psychology, Eastern spiritual practices, and mystical traditions of the world. The name holotropic means literally "moving toward wholeness" (from the Greek "holos"=whole and "trepein"=moving in the direction of something).

He has published over 140 articles and many books on subjects that relate to the healing, transformative, and evolutionary potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness, which have been translated into multiple languages. His book catalogue includes:

Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research.

The Human Encounter with Death. (with Joan Halifax).

LSD Psychotherapy.

Beyond Death: Gates of Consciousness (with Christina Grof).

Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science (ed.).

Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death, and Transcendence in Psychotherapy.

The Adventure of Self-Discovery.

Human Survival and Consciousness Evolution (ed.).

Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis (ed. with Christina Grof).

The Stormy Search for the Self: A Guide to Personal Growth Through Transformational Crises (with Christina Grof).

The Holotropic Mind: The Three Levels of Consciousness and How They Shape Our Lives (with Hal Zina Bennett).

Books of the Dead: Manuals for Living and Dying.

The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human

Consciousness.

The Transpersonal Vision: The Healing Potential of Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness.

The Consciousness Revolution: A Transatlantic Dialogue (two days with Stanislav Grof, Ervin Laszlo, and Peter Russell).

Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research.

Call of the Jaguar. A science fiction novel available currently only in Russian and Danish translation.

The Ultimate Journey: Consciousness and the Mystery of Death

When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Realities

What all these books have in common is the courage to speak in a forthright manner about experiences that are often judged as dysfunctional when expressed in general conversation. Stan's latest book is entitled: "When The Impossible Happens." The categories explored that highlight the journey that Stan has taken in his career range from synchronicity, birth and prenatal life memory, reincarnation and the akashic record to ESP and the paranormal, unorthodox psychiatry, and transpersonal psychology's relation to mainstream science.

Wisdom: What is the most important message that you would like people to receive from your body of work?

Stan: I have spent 50 years studying non-ordinary states of consciousness, which are states that shamans experience during their initiatory crises or when they work with clients and that native people use in healing ceremonies and in various rites of passage, Additional examples of these states are experiences of the yogis, Buddhists, Christian and Moslem mystics, those encountered in the work with psychedelics, near-death experiences, and so on. And I have come to the conclusion that if we study these states and the phenomena that occur around them (for example astonishing synchronicities), it would lead to a major revolution in psychology and psychiatry.

We would have to revise some of the fundamental assumptions that we currently have about the dimensions of the human psyche, about the relationship between consciousness and matter, and even about the nature of reality. This revolution would be comparable in its scope and depth to what the physicists faced in the first three decades of the 20th century, when they had to move from Newtonian physics to Einstein's theories of relativity and then to quantum physics.

Wisdom: How can we educate the medical profession about the kinds of experiences you explore in your book in a way that will help shift their perception about mental health?

Stan: One of the major problems is that mainstream

professionals dismiss the experiences in non-ordinary states of consciousness as symptoms of serious mental disease, which cannot provide any useful information, because they are products of pathological processes in the brain. However, those of us who have subjected these phenomena to careful study and experienced them personally have been able to recognize and appreciate their theoretical and practical significance.

The evidence for the revolutionary importance of these observations is overwhelming. It has already been repeatedly described and discussed in many scientific papers and professional books. The major obstacle for the recognition of these discoveries is the fact that they challenge some of the most fundamental philosophical assumptions of Western materialistic science. They cannot be handled by some minor adjustments of our theories, by little “conceptual patchwork” that is technically referred to as “ad hoc hypothesis.” They indicate that the current scientific worldview has major inadequacies and flaws. This is a very painful realization and such a radical revolution in scientific thinking does not happen overnight.

Wisdom: What prompted you to write the book: "When The Impossible Happens"?

Stan: The answer will be probably very different from what you expect. The idea to write this book did not emerge organically from my professional development. The reason was much more prosaic. In

February 2001, our house in Mill Valley burned down with everything in it, including my research records and my entire library. As a result, it became very difficult to write the kind of books I used to write. When the Impossible Happens is a collection of personal stories, selective memoir with special focus on extraordinary experiences, the very nature of which challenges the worldview of Western science. All I needed to write it was my memory.

Wisdom: So, you were able to turn what could be labeled a tragedy into a treasure. Had the fire not occurred, do you think the book would have taken form?

Stan: I was going to write it anyway at some point. I think about it as a complement to my more professionally oriented books. It presents the material in a completely different way, in the form of personal narratives that can reach a much larger audience.

Wisdom: Are they stories that people can identify with because it is in less technical language?

Stan: Yes. It is a book that does not require any background in psychology, is easily readable and understandable, and consequently more people should be able to relate to it. And yet, I believe that it conveys the message as effectively as more technical treatment of the same subject. In some sense, it might be more convincing, since it presents the challenging observations in a very condensed way, one after the other.

Wisdom: Where did the idea come from that human beings could use the breath to induce altered states of consciousness that would otherwise require administration of substances such as LSD?

Stan: The idea came to me when I was still working with psychedelics. My clients, who were coming down from psychedelic sessions, occasionally experienced spontaneous episodes of faster breathing. They told me that this fast breathing intensified their experiences. Although the effect of the substance was already subsiding, their experiences were suddenly as profound as they had been earlier in the session. Later, when Christina and I lived at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, and were not able to use psychedelics any more, we used this observation to develop the holotropic breathwork. Christina, a teacher of hatha yoga, contributed some yogic elements to the process and developed the music that we use in the sessions.

Wisdom: When people have spontaneous episodes of non-ordinary states of consciousness - what you term 'spiritual emergency' (for example kundalini awakening), how would you suggest that they deal with it, since there isn't a great deal of support available?

Stan: The most important problem that has to be overcome is the fact that we do not have in mainstream psychiatry the concept of "mystical" or "spiritual experiences" as a normal or potentially

supernormal phenomena. In traditional circles, these experiences are considered manifestations of mental disease; they receive pathological labels and are treated by tranquilizing medications. This is a serious misconception. The work we have done with psychedelics and, more recently, with holotropic breathwork, which is a more natural method of inducing non-ordinary states, strongly suggests that many of these experiences – when correctly understood and properly supported - can be healing, transformative, and even evolutionary. Once this is recognized, it becomes imperative to create a network of facilities, in which people undergoing spiritual emergency would receive psychological support for their experiences, rather than routine and indiscriminate treatment using suppressive medication.

Wisdom: Are there actually programs that offer that kind of assistance in addition to the work that you and your wife Christina have done?

Stan: The late John Perry, famous Jungian psychiatrist, created two centers specializing in treating these conditions; one in San Francisco called Diabasis and another one near San Diego called Chrysalis. In these two facilities, clients who were having their first episode were encouraged to go through whatever they had to go through instead of getting tranquilizers. John then helped these people process these experiences using the map of the psyche developed by C. G. Jung. John had written a series of books on the subject of spiritual emergency, including "The Far Side of Madness"

and “Trials of the Visionary Mind.” Psychologist Barbara Findeisen had a similar facility in Geyserville, north of San Francisco, called Pocket Ranch, and there have been others.

Unfortunately, these alternative programs usually did not survive very long. The basic problem with them is that, even though they costs much less than psychiatric hospitalization, the insurance companies refuse to cover the costs, because such facilities do not use officially recognized forms of treatment, The clients thus have to pay for this treatment out of their own pockets, or the programs depend on external funding. That naturally becomes a major obstacle.

Wisdom: I imagine, that as one of the founders of Transpersonal Psychology, you would hope that the trend is moving toward the transpersonal model. Do you find that more professionals are heading in that direction?

Stan: I have no doubt that these new ideas will eventually be accepted; there are already indications that it is happening, but such radical changes can take a very long time. For example, the Copernican revolution involving shift from the geocentric system to the heliocentric system - recognition that the Earth revolves around the sun, rather than the other way around – took over 100 years before it was accepted by the scientific authorities of its time.

Wisdom: So, we have to hope that it takes less than 100 years

for this shift to occur.

Stan: It has been my experience that many professionals who personally accepted the transpersonal vision are hiding their new belief from their conservative colleagues because they are afraid that they would be professionally discredited. And in practice, people who have spiritual experiences continue receiving stigmatizing pathological labels and are often ridiculed. Psychiatric literature contains numerous articles and books that discuss what would be the most appropriate clinical diagnoses for many of the great figures of spiritual history. St. John of the Cross has been called “hereditary degenerate,” St. Teresa of Avila dismissed as a severe hysterical psychotic, and Mohammed's mystical experiences have been attributed to epilepsy. Many other religious and spiritual personages, such as the Buddha, Jesus, Ramakrishna, and Sri Ramana Maharshi have been seen as suffering from psychoses, because of their visionary experiences and spiritual insights were labeled “hallucinations” and “delusions.”

Wisdom: When these types of experiences began occurring in your own life, were you reluctant to talk about them?

Stan: Back in Prague, when I first encountered these experiences in psychedelic sessions of my clients and in my own sessions, I was very excited and started talking about them with my colleagues. However, I quickly realized that it was not something that they would readily accept and that they would think I was crazy.

Wisdom: Was that the reaction, or was it accepted by some of your colleagues?

Stan: Those colleagues who did not have personal experiences with psychedelics had generally great difficulties accepting that the states induced by them could reveal new information about the psyche, let alone be therapeutic. There were several reasons why it was so difficult to accept it. In traditional clinical work, what happens in psychedelic sessions and even in the holotropic breathwork falls into the category of psychopathology – powerful emotions, perceptual changes, mystical experiences, preoccupation with philosophical and spiritual issues, and so on. It is very difficult for the average professional to believe that something which is normally considered pathological could be healing, transformative, and even evolutionary. It requires a very radical shift in thinking that is difficult to make.

Wisdom: What is your grandest vision for human evolution?

Stan: I think it becomes increasingly difficult to deny that we are facing a serious global crisis, one that might eventually threaten survival of life on the planet. This crisis has many facets – historical, economic, political, ecological, military, religious, and others. But, in the last analysis, they all have one common denominator – they reflect the stage of consciousness evolution of the human species. Many of the manifestations of this crisis are not really primary; their deep underlying causes are psychospiritual. It seems that the only

real hope for humanity is a profound psychospiritual transformation.

There are methods – ancient and modern – that could facilitate such a positive transformation and move us to a new evolutionary level. Some of them have been known for centuries or millennia as part of various spiritual traditions, others emerged from modern experiential psychotherapies, consciousness research, and psychedelic therapy. They could imbue humanity with a different hierarchy of values, ecological awareness, constructive life strategy, compassion, tolerance, and capacity for peaceful coexistence with fellow humans and other species. I hope that this transformation will occur and that we have enough time for it to happen. It is highly improbable that the global crisis could be resolved by application of the same philosophy and the same strategies that got us into this mess in the first place.

Wisdom: I have forgotten whose quote it is that relates to the idea that we can't solve a problem at the level at which it was created.

Stan: I think it was Albert Einstein.

Wisdom: Is there anything you would like to add to what we have been discussing?

Stan: I would like to say a few words about some revolutionary advances in science and how they keep narrowing the gap that

initially seemed to exist between transpersonal psychology and the scientific worldview. What I have in mind are philosophical implications of quantum-relativistic physics, as discussed by Fritjof Capra and many others, outline of new biology by Rupert Sheldrake and his theory of morphogenetic field, Karl Pribram's holographic model of the brain, David Bohm's theory of holomovement, Ervin Laszlo's theory of the PSI Field (Akashic Field), and many others. What has been very exciting to watch is that all these developments tend to undermine the seventeenth century thinking of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm that still dominates mainstream science, but are always enthusiastically welcome by people in the transpersonal movement as another piece into the mosaic of a future comprehensive worldview that will integrate science and spirituality.

Wisdom: I imagine that this is the reason why movies like "What the Bleep Do We Know?" have become so popular, that people may be looking for new ways of viewing life.

Stan: The same trend can be seen in the publishing business. In recent years many Jungian books and accounts of near death experiences have made the NY Times best-seller list. The spiritual element found also its way into Hollywood movies, as exemplified by such films as the Star Wars series, Lord of the Ring trilogy, The Matrix, Resurrection, What Dreams May Come, and many others, describing the battle between good and evil, spiritual transformation, and after-death states. What is very encouraging is the response of the audiences, showing that they find these topics very desirable and

valuable. Once the extraordinary power of the media would get behind the transpersonal vision, the psychospiritual transformation of humanity could become greatly facilitated. I am convinced that the phenomenal special effects made possible by digital technology are capable not only to portray spiritual experiences, but actually induce them in millions of viewers, Unfortunately, they have been so far used mostly for depicting scenes of destruction.

Wisdom: And maybe that will cause a shift in the mainstream medical profession. If they see that the media gives these transformational experiences credibility, then perhaps they will take it more seriously.

The readers, who are interested to pursue Stan's ideas farther will find more information in his book "Psychology of the Future." This volume summarizes his research findings obtained during the last fifty years, outlines the challenges his observations present to traditional psychology and psychiatry, and suggests the necessary revisions in traditional thinking that they would require. Feel also free to visit his website stanislavgrof.com for additional information, which includes upcoming training schedules for holotropic breathwork facilitators and a deeper explanation of the evolutionary/revolutionary work that Stan continues to do.

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